

16 THREE RENAISSANCE WRITERS

Renaissance artists gradually developed a new style in painting and sculpture. Medieval paintings and sculpture usually decorated churches. Renaissance paintings and sculpture adorned the mansions of wealthy businessmen, as well as churches. Medieval painters rarely signed their work. Renaissance artists signed theirs in bold letters. Some even painted their own faces into crowd scenes. Medieval art centered on religious subjects and man's relation to God. While they did not abandon religious themes, Renaissance painters and sculptors also represented classical myths and scenes from everyday life. Their great contribution was the use of perspective.

In literature, Renaissance people also departed from tradition. They wrote in their native tongues as well as in Latin, the language of the educated. The Florentine Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), known best for the *Divine Comedy*, was the first great writer to use Italian. Moreover, in the *Divine Comedy* Dante gave the major role of guide to Virgil, the Roman poet, rather than to a religious figure.

The Renaissance writers studied the styles used by the ancient Romans and tried to imitate them. But more important, the ideas they expressed were far different from those of medieval writers. They attempted to portray people and the world they lived in. Reading 16 contains excerpts from three Renaissance writers. As you study these selections, keep the following questions in mind:

A Sonnet by Petrarch

Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374) is often referred to as the "father of humanism." He was one of the earliest scholars to study the classical writings of ancient Rome and to write poetry in Italian. The following selection is one of Petrarch's many sonnets to Laura, the woman he loved.

The Sonnets, Triumphs, and Other Poems of Petrarch, translated by various hands (London: George Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1879). pp. 88-89.

Mien refers to a person's air or appearance.

Loose to the breeze her golden tresses flow'd
Wildly in thousand mazy ringlets blown,
And from her eyes unconquer'd glances shone,
Those glances now so sparingly bestow'd
And true or false, meseem'd some signs she show'd
As o'er her cheek soft pity's hue was thrown;
I, whose whole breast with love's soft food was sown,
What wonder if at once my bosom glow'd?
Graceful she moved, with more than mortal mien,
In form an angel: and her accents won
Upon the ear with more than human sound.
A spirit heavenly pure, a living sun,
Was what I saw; and if no more 'twere seen,
T' unbend the bow will never heal the wound.

The Decameron

Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) is best known for the Decameron, written about 1348. One of the earliest prose works in Italian, it is a collection of tales supposedly told by a group of people who are staying at a country estate when the Black Plague has struck the city. To pass the time, they take turns telling tales.

Giovanni Boccaccio. *The Decameron*, trans. by Richard Aldington (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1930). Copyright, © 1930 by Mme. Catherine Guillaume. Reprinted by permission of Doubleday.

THE SIXTH DAY, THE FOURTH TALE

Currado Gianfigliuzzi was always a noble citizen of our city, liberal and magnificent, leading a gentleman's life, continually delighting in dogs and hawks, and allowing his more serious affairs to slide. One day . . . his falcon brought down a crane, and finding it to be plump and

young he sent it to his excellent cook, a Venetian named Chichibio, telling him to roast it for supper and see that it was well done.

Chichibio, who was a bit of a fool, prepared the crane, set it before the fire, and began to cook it carefully. When it was nearly done and giving off a most savory odor, there came into the kitchen a young peasant woman, named Brunetta, with whom Chichibio was very much in love. Smelling the odor of the bird and seeing it, she begged Chichibio to give her a leg of it. But he replied with a snatch of song:

"You won't get it from me, Donna Brunetta, you won't get it from me."

This made Donna Brunetta angry, and . . . they had high words together. In the end Chichibio, not wanting to anger his lady-love, took off one of the crane's legs, and gave it to her. A little later the one-legged crane was served before Currado and his guests. Currado was astonished at the sight, sent for Chichibio, and asked him what had happened to the other leg of the crane. The lying Venetian replied:

"Sir, cranes only have one leg and one foot."

"What the devil d'you mean," said Currado angrily, "by saying they have only one leg and foot? Did I never see a crane before?"

"It's as I say, Sir," Chichibio persisted, "and I'll show it you in living birds whenever you wish."

Currado would not bandy [exchange] further words from respect to his guests, but said:

"Since you promise to show me in living birds something I never saw or heard of, I shall be glad to see it tomorrow morning. But . . . if it turns out otherwise I'll have you tanned in such a way that you'll remember my name as long as you live."

When day appeared next morning, Currado, who had not been able to sleep for rage all night, got up still furious, and ordered his horses to be brought. He made Chichibio mount a pad [horse], and took him in the direction of a river where cranes could always be seen at that time of day, saying:

"We'll soon see whether you were lying or not last night."

Chichibio, seeing that Currado was still angry and that he must try to prove his lie, which he had not the least idea how to do, rode alongside Currado in a state of consternation, and would willingly have fled if he had known how. But as he couldn't do that, he kept gazing round him and thought everything he saw was a crane with two legs. But when they came to the river, he happened to be the first to see a dozen cranes on the bank, all standing on one leg as they do when they are asleep. He quickly pointed them out to Currado, saying:

"Messer, you can see that what I said last evening is true, that cranes have only one leg and one foot; you have only to look at them over there."

Donna is an Italian term of address used with the Christian name of a woman.

"Wait," said Currado, "I'll show you they have two."

And going up closer to them, he shouted: "Ho! Ho!" And at this the cranes put down their other legs and, after running a few steps, took to flight. Currado then turned to Chichibio, saying:

"Now, you glutton, what of it? D'you think they have two?"

In his dismay Chichibio, not knowing how the words came to him, replied:

"Yes, messer, but you didn't shout 'ho! ho!' to the bird last night. If you had shouted, it would have put out the other leg and foot, as those did."

Currado was so pleased with this answer that all his anger was converted into merriment and laughter, and he said:

"Chichibio, you're right; I ought to have done so."

So with this quick and amusing answer Chichibio escaped punishment, and made his peace with his master.

The Ideal of the Well-Rounded Man

The ancient Greeks believed a man should be well-rounded and that he should develop every aspect of his personality. Count Baldassare Castiglione, a sixteenth-century Italian diplomat, combined this ideal with a Renaissance outlook in a book called The Courtier. As the title implies, Castiglione was writing for the nobility, not the merchants and craftsmen.

Baldassare Castiglione. *The Book of the Courtier*, Leonard E. Opdycke, trans. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903). Language simplified.

For this evening's game, let us select someone to portray a perfect courtier. He should explain all of the conditions and special qualities that a courtier must have.

I would have our courtier sometimes take part in quiet and peaceful exercises. If he is to escape envy and appear agreeable to everyone, the courtier should join others in what they are doing. Yet he must use good judgment to see that he never appears foolish. Let him laugh, joke, banter, frolic, and dance, yet in such a way that he shall always appear genial and discreet. And in whatever he does or says, let him do it with grace.

I would have the courtier know literature, in particular those studies known as the humanities. He should be able to speak not only Latin but Greek, as well. Let him read and know the Roman and Greek poets, orators, and historians. Let him be proficient in writing verse and prose, particularly in our own language. Even if he does not become perfect

in the art of writing verse and prose, he should still practice it so that he will at least be able to judge the work of others.

My lords, you must know that I am not content with the courtier unless he is also a musician. Besides being able to read and understand music, he must be able to play the different instruments. Music is the best relaxation or medicine for a troubled man. Moreover, it is a most becoming and praiseworthy pastime during leisure hours, especially in the court, where it relieves the boredom and pleases the ladies.

Our courtier should know how to draw and paint. Do not be surprised that I believe the courtier should know this art, which today seems to be practiced only by artisans and not by gentlemen. I remember having read that the ancients, especially in Greece, had the boys of noble birth study painting in school. They believed it was an honorable and necessary thing, and it was recognized as the first of the liberal arts. At the same time they forbade slaves to practice art. Among the Romans, too, it was held in highest honor.

And truly one who does not honor this art seems unreasonable to me. This universe that we see—the vast heaven so richly adorned with shining stars, the earth circled by seas, varied with mountains, valleys, and rivers and decorated with so many different trees, beautiful flowers, and grasses—is a great and noble picture, painted by the hand of nature and of God. Whoever is capable of copying the picture seems to me to deserve great praise.

► Are any of your values the same as those of Petrarch, Boccaccio, or Castiglione? Do you have similar ideas about the nature of man?

